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Making foreign policy fit the real world

By Robert R. Bowie

A week ago, Edwin Meese, the President's right-hand man, told the Monitor that the President was doing well in foreign policy "by any criterion," and that the US position had improved worldwide. Few qualified observers would agree. In the view of most, the conduct of foreign policy so far has been largely inept, confused, and misguided. Under the circumstances, the optimism of Mr. Meese is itself troubling, and reflects how far he is out of his depth in this field.

What is wrong? Several things, but one is central. An effective foreign policy must be based on a realistic understanding of the external conditions which pose the problems and should shape responses. In seeking to work with other nations or to influence or constrain them, it is essential to take account of their attitudes, interests, and priorities. Faulty appraisal of the external environment is probably the major source of failures in foreign policy.

Over and over, the Reagan policy has misjudged or ignored the actual situation in various areas.

In the Middle East, the administration's effort to promote the anti-Soviet "consensus," embracing Israel and moderate Arab states, disregarded the priority of the Arab concern about an Israel bent on expanding its borders at Palestinian expense.

In Western Europe, it has been insensitive and obtuse, especially on the nuclear issue. For decades the top priority for Europeans has been to assure stable deterrence and minimize the risk of war. Anything which evokes images of war-fighting is bound to arouse deep-seated anxiety which lurks just below the surface. Yet the administration has provoked such fears by its handling of the neutron bomb, theatre nuclear weapons, limited nuclear war, and reluctance about arms control talks. It has thereby stimulated the nuclear protests, facilitated Soviet efforts to alienate Europe from the US, and complicated the problems of allied leaders.

The approach to the third world has suffered from serious misconceptions. Domestic conflicts like El Salvador cannot be treated almost solely in East-West terms while disregarding indigenous injustices. Moreover it is surely doctrinaire to look only to self-help and private initiative for development. They are, of course, essential, but focusing on them without recognizing the critical role of the public sector and of substantial foreign aid seems naive and callous.

In the case of the Soviet Union, the absence of a clear concept regarding the relationship hardly needs to be labored.

These grave defects of the Reagan foreign policy are not an accident. They result from the way it is being managed or mismanaged. Like many predecessors, Mr. Reagan took office with little first-hand knowledge of the outside world or experience with making foreign policy. Most presidents, however, have surrounded themselves with experienced advisers and have developed procedures for drawing on the expertise of the departments. Mr. Reagan has not done so. His closest White House advisers may be bright and politically astute, but they lack any solid grounding or expertise in foreign affairs. Mr. Allen, the national security assistant, has been called a "notetaker," and he and his staff appear to have little influence in the making of decisions.

The roles of Secretaries Haig and Weinberger in policymaking and the means for coordinating advice from them and others to the President seem rather unclear. The ultimate policy decisions often appear to be made by the President mainly with the advice of the White House "triumvirate." And the process does not normally seem to expose the President to the views of experts who could broaden his perspective and knowledge.

Indeed, so far, he may be learning as much or more from the visits of foreign leaders, and meetings like the summits in Ottawa and Cancún. Preparing for such meetings and the discussions at them have apparently gotten him beyond the simplicities of ideology and campaign rhetoric. At Cancún, a third-world official commented: "The process of educating President Reagan as to the realities of the world has begun." And for whatever it's worth, Mr. Reagan's statement after the Cancún summit was less doctrinaire than the speech he gave before going.

That is all to the good. But obviously it is not the way to produce a coherent foreign policy adequate to the complexities of dealing with allies, the Soviet Union, China, and the developing world, or with security, arms control, and nuclear proliferation. That will require a major overhaul of the way policy is prepared, decided, and carried out.

The purpose should be to mobilize and coordinate the expertise of the departments and CIA and to expose the President to competing analyses and judgments before decisions. The National Security Council system under Eisenhower did that with a strong secretary of state and a low-profile national security adviser, responsible for making the process effective rather than for a policy input. Judging by Mr. Meese's role, however, Mr. Reagan seems to rely on a trusted adviser to help him formulate issues for decision.

If so, he should have someone qualified in foreign affairs to parallel Mr. Meese in the domestic field, as well as a more orderly process for analysis and debate. The President himself needs to reshape the system promptly to avoid further costly floundering.

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